A Whole New Morality
February 20, 2011

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Psalm 119:33–40
Matthew 5:38–48

"Give me understanding, that I may keep your law."
Psalm 119:34 (NRSV)

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient time. . . .
But I say to you."
Matthew 5: 21 (NRSV)

God of compassion, you let your rain fall on the just and the unjust. Expand and deepen our hearts so that we may love as you love. Help us to reach out to victims so that our love may help them heal. Help us to work tirelessly to renew our society in its very heart so that violence will be no more. Amen.

Sister Helen Prejean

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our minds to your word. Give us courage to think deeply and to make loving and courageous decisions in all the challenges and perplexities of our lives in the world. Remind us again that at the heart of all reality is you and your love revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Austin, on the far west side of the city, along Chicago Avenue, two rival gangs used to enforce a boundary between their turfs. Neighbors knew not to cross the line for fear of getting shot. One day, a fourteen-year-old boy was walking to school when he accidentally crossed the line. He was shot in the back, paralyzed from the waist down. The predictable began: Rival gangs planned to retaliate and counterretaliate. Threats and counterthreats were issued. Everybody knew both groups had plenty of guns, a history of violence, and the will to act. The community waited anxiously for the first shot to set off a season of killing.

But then two men from an organization called CeaseFire, trained as "violence interrupters," who knew both gangs, went to work. Tempers cooled. After a month they persuaded leaders of the rival gangs to sit down and talk. Eventually they negotiated a peace treaty. Today the boundary

lines are gone, and there hasn't been a single shooting related to that incident that happened a year ago.

The story could have ended very differently and tragically and frequently does. The cycle of violence escalates. More funerals, more hospital bills, more police time, more court time, jail time and the mounting costs of incarceration, more kids without fathers.

The account of this incident was written for the *Chicago Tribune* by Dr. Gary Slutkin, who founded CeaseFire, and its Executive Director, Tio Hardiman, who has spoken here on behalf of reasonable gun control. CeaseFire strives to identify places of probable gang violence and intercedes before the shooting starts to interrupt the cycle of revenge and retaliation that has been part of the human story since the beginning. (See "*The Homicide That Didn't Happen*," *Chicago Tribune,* 9 February 2011)

One day, Jesus of Nazareth had a few words to say on the subject.

Master teacher that he is, he begins with what everybody knows: conventional wisdom.

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; . . . But I say to you, if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

Six times "You have heard. . . . But I say to you."
- Murder, Anger
- Adultery, Lust
- Divorce
- Oaths

And then, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other. If anyone takes your coat, give your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go a second mile."

It sounds daunting, unnatural, impossible. Furthermore it sounds a little limp, weak, meek, and mild; "doormat religion" someone called it; religion without the will to stand up and fight back and resist evil and challenge injustice. Nietzsche held this kind of religion in contempt, thought that Christianity was not for the strong, the powerful. Hitler agreed.

Did Jesus really mean for his followers not to resist murder, rape, child abuse, violent spousal abuse? Are we to cooperate with our abusers? Are we to acquiesce when our nation is attacked?

The conventional formula—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—has been around forever and has been nearly universally accepted. It's in the Bible three times: in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. It is the moral rationale for capital punishment, and it is deeply ingrained in our psyche. Don't let yourself be pushed around; give no quarter. If the driver in the car ahead of you cuts in, do it to him at the next light, pull up alongside, and glare menacingly; if he gives you the one-finger urban salute, give it right back. Sometimes it turns tragic. Two truck drivers, determined not to give way, stop their rigs on an Interstate, get out and fight, one kills the other. In Italy several years ago we were on our way to dinner, looking for a parking place along one of those narrow, winding streets. I could see in a rearview mirror behind me a big Mercedes, tailgating, driving too close. And when I found a spot and began to squeeze the car into it, the driver behind me began to flash his brights, so I slowed down and turned around and gave him a look. He blew his horn again. When I was finally parked, he pulled up beside and glared. So I opened the window and glared back. He said something in Italian. I responded. He raised his voice; I raised my voice. Soon we were shouting at each other, in different languages. National and personal honor was at stake. When he finally pulled away, my passenger, who is a much gentler Christian than I, said sweetly, "Honey, I'm so proud of you."

It may be in our DNA, but it doesn't do a thing except raise your blood pressure and make more conflict, which frequently turns violent with tragic results.

One New Testament Scholar, Stanley Saunders, says that "Jesus here uncovered the curse of violence, distrust, and alienation that has stalked humankind from the beginning of time" (Stanley Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew*).

Capital punishment is a case in point. There is currently a bill on Governor Quinn's desk to abolish the death penalty in Illinois. We are one of a very few nations in the world that are still executing criminals. The others are not nations with whom we ordinarily like to be equated: Iran, North Korea. Many voices are being raised to urge the governor to sign the bill—lawyers, judges, state attorneys, prosecuting attorneys. I have added my voice. If you would like to add your voice, there are letters to sign at the mission table, and volunteers with clipboards are also available after worship. Author and former federal prosecutor Scott Turow has written an eloquent letter urging the governor to sign the bill, a letter in which he asks, "What exactly is the death penalty for? And what do we as a society hope to gain by executing our fellow citizens?"

Deterrence?

Turow and many others cite study after study that show that the threat of the death penalty does not deter capital criminals. Former Federal Judge Abner Mikva observed how totally inane it is to assume that the least rational members of society—first-degree murderers—will stop to ponder their fate, act rationally and decide against killing someone because of the possibility of execution.

Cost effectiveness?

The death penalty, because of court and lawyers' fees, costs a lot more, far more than the cost of incarceration for life. Some propose that executing the criminal will bring closure to the family of the victim. I've never been comfortable with that idea, and my conviction was solidified by a dear friend, an attorney, a strong opponent of the death penalty, whose sister and husband were murdered, who said simply that "killing the killer will not bring closure to my grief." She finds the eye for an eye, a life for a life, argument insulting. "His life is not worth theirs. His death could never begin to pay for theirs."

Most compelling to me is what it does to the soul of a society. The death penalty is about revenge and retaliation, pure and simple. It demeans us all. Mario Cuomo got it right when he said, "The death penalty is wrong. It lowers us all: it is a surrender to the worst that is in us; it uses a power—the official power to kill by execution—that has never elevated a society, never brought back a life, never inspired anything but hate" (Erik C. Owens, John D. Carlson, and Eric P. Elshtain, eds., *Religion and the Death Penalty: A Call for Reckoning*).

The people Jesus told to turn the other cheek were subjected to abuse, oppression, and violence daily at the hands of the occupying Romans. They were insulted, humiliated, slapped, beaten, and killed, crucified—executed as all political oppressors do to anyone who openly resists. Roman soldiers were permitted to conscript civilians to carry their pack and equipment for a distance of one mile but no more. It happened all the time, particularly to strong young men. "Here, boy, carry this for me" and the civilian dropped whatever he was doing and walked a mile with the soldier.

There were, and still are, two ways to relate to the authority and power of an oppressor. The first is to accept it and all the abuses that go along with it, cooperate and collaborate. Leadership in Jerusalem, the High Priest, the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court, the Temple authorities chose to do that—cooperate with Rome. They certainly weren't the only people in history to do it in order to preserve something of security and stability. The other way is active resistance. In Jesus' day the Zealots were an armed resistance organization that attacked Roman soldiers, harassed Roman outposts and supply lines, as resistance groups always do. Jesus is here proposing

another way, a third way, a way of nonviolent resistance, which restores the identity and dignity of the victim and preserves the hope, at least, for reconciliation and peace. When a Jewish civilian was slapped in the face by a Roman official and instead of striking back, which would result in his death and maybe the death or torture of his family, instead of striking back or crumbling to the ground begging for mercy, if instead he proudly offers his other cheek, something changes profoundly in the situation. He is now resisting nonviolently in a profound way. He is now an active part of the dynamic, not merely its victim. He is a full human being, not simply an object of abuse. Gandhi understood the dynamic, loved these sayings of Jesus, built nonviolent resistance into a movement that accomplished what decades of armed rebellion could never accomplish, namely the independence of India and the end of British colonial occupation. Martin Luther King Jr. understood the power of nonviolent resistance and trained young African American college students nonviolent resistance—to sit at segregated lunch counters and allow angry white people to pour ketchup, milk, salt and pepper over their heads, fighting every instinct in them to strike back, showing the world a picture of the evil of bigotry and racism. It worked.

My favorite illustration comes from the remarkable story of Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball. It was such a phenomenon that my father took me to Pittsburgh that summer of 1947 to see my first major league game. The Dodgers were in town, with Robinson playing second base. The conversation between Branch Ricky, the Dodgers general manager, and Jackie Robinson, is now legendary. Ricky knew that his decision to sign Robinson to a contract with the Dodgers would not be popular. Robinson was a superb athlete, but no black man had ever played for a Major League team, and many baseball owners, players, and fans wanted it to stay that way.

During the conversation, Branch Rickey fired questions at Robinson: What would he do if a restaurant waiter refused to serve him, if he couldn’t stay in the same hotel as the rest of the team, if opposing pitchers threw at his head? Robinson was confused, “Mr. Ricky, do you want a player who is afraid to fight back?” he asked. “I want a player with enough guts not to fight back,” Ricky explained. The final question and answer are in the history books: “It’s the last game of the World Series. The score is tied. I go into you spikes first, but you don’t give ground. . . . All I see is your black face. . . . I haul off and punch you in the cheek. . . . What do you do?” “Mr. Ricky,” Robinson answered, “I have two cheeks.”

Jackie Robinson was a proud, strong, aggressive man who never bowed to anyone. But because he had the grace and strength and courage to respond nonviolently, he changed baseball and played a major role in changing American life.

It works. By remaining nonviolent the crowds in Cairo's Tahrir square allowed the army the option of not shooting, and before long a thirty-year autocratic system crumbled. Autocrats know that nonviolent resistance is much harder to deal with than violent resistance. The autocrats in Iran understand clearly and so are busy arresting, jailing, and threatening to execute anyone who dares criticize the government.

It is not a prescription for foreign policy when your country is being invaded. It is not a mandate to cooperate with someone who is threatening to harm your child.

It is an invitation to a whole new way of thinking about religion. In Jesus' day and our own, religion was expressed and practiced in rules to follow and prohibitions to be obeyed. Jesus said God wants more of us than that. God wants a love and compassion that is more than rules. In fact rules cannot encompass or prescribe this love. God wants people who love justice, who extend compassion and a helping hand to anyone in need. God wants people who don't automatically respond to violence with more violence. God wants active love, people who don't exclude or shut out or walk away from anyone. God wants responsible people who think and act creatively and lovingly in every situation, particularly those situations for which there is no simple law or rule. Life is full of those quandaries that do not submit to simple rules: when a loved one is on life support with no hope of recovery, tragic pregnancies, abstinence from physical intimacy because circumstances do not permit marriage. God wants people with moral imagination and courage to live responsibly, bravely, in this oftentimes confusing, always complex world of ours, people who will struggle to discover and do the loving thing, the moral thing.

Jesus told his followers that their righteousness had to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, the most righteous people in society, who never disobeyed a single rule. That is, God wants more from us than memorizing and obeying the rules and avoiding wrongdoing and sin. God wants responsible, imaginative people who know the rules and grapple with, try to understand and follow, their spirit and intent.

Jesus forever changed the way people think about religion and about God.

From the beginning of time human beings have imagined God as an otherworldly power whose demands must be met and who hands out punishment to those who ignore divine demands and break religious rules. That is still the way many, if not most, people think about God. Anne Lamott says most people think of God as your high school principal going through your files and not liking what he finds there.

Jesus taught another way, a new way, to think about God, a startling new truth.

Marcus Borg writes, “Jesus discloses that at the center of everything is a reality that is love, love that is with us and wills our well-being, an image of God as the compassionate one who invites us into a relationship, which is the source of transformation of human life—individually and corporately.”

Sometimes human beings act in surprisingly unselfish, compassionate, courageous ways. One of the blessings of working in a church is that you see it every day, human beings showing something of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ in acts of unselfishness and kindness and compassion and generosity. When that happens, a bit of the kingdom of God breaks through and comes to being in our midst.

That finally is the issue: a love that is expressed in the moral laws and rules by which we live, but also a love that is greater than the moral laws, a love that comes to us even when we fail morally, even when we do not live up to God’s hopes and expectations, even when we act sinfully, hatefully, irresponsibly; a love that will never let us go; a love that changes everything and for a moment, when human beings act out of love, when human beings make ethical decisions out of love, we find ourselves in the very presence of God, and in God’s kingdom on earth.

Amen.